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The Pope:

The Plot Thickens

MEHMET Ali Agca kissed the pope's ring; the pope pardoned Agca — theologically, of course — for trying to kill him; and Yuri Andropov missed the second day (as he had missed the first) of an important Communist Party meeting, enhancing speculation that he's dying. All this occurred on Dec. 27; the conjunction is not without significance.

For all the squeamishness of Western intelligence services, the talk of a KGB-inspired plot to kill the pope will not down.

As Claire Sterling writes in *The Time of the Assassins*, to be published Jan. 9 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston: "He (Agca) did not act alone. We know that now, since he has said so himself and the Italian judiciary has confirmed it." The best evidence that can be gathered — Miss Sterling has been investigating the case almost from the start, on commission from *Reader's Digest* — demonstrates that Agca was working for a Bulgarian spy ring that meant to rub out both Lech Walesa and the pope. The idea was thereby to bring Poland back under control.

Bulgarian fingerprints are all over the operation. The Bulgarians are long-time errand boys for the KGB. The KGB was headed at the time by Andropov, though he himself was acting for Leonid Brezhnev.

Come the second Russian revolution, the relevant secret-police files, jerked open and handed out, will doubtless show the lines of plotting. Meantime, the plot itself is the thing to notice: the trouble being that West-

ern governments don't really want to notice; in the teeth of the evidence, they pooh-pooh the Bulgarian Connection. Such efforts, says Miss Sterling, "defy understanding."

Her own hunch is "that the CIA was not instructed to follow the case, did not follow it, and in the beginning did not know what it was all about. Then it did not want to admit that it did not know what the case was all about, and felt the need to defend itself by insisting that other authorities in a position to know better had to be wrong."

Perhaps so. And if so, how disgraceful. The moral of this grossly immoral plot is that the Kremlin will scruple at nothing, not even the attempted murder of the spiritual leader of 750 million Roman Catholics. Is this not a datum worth remarking?

Of course there's another dimension here. The pope's life wasn't taken. He lived. His attempted murderer has repented and been pardoned. The man who apparently ordered the execution is dead; his chief of plotters is apparently dying.

Is there something suggestive — a better word may be "hopeful" — about all this? John Paul himself thinks so. "I also believe," he said, "that the meeting today is providential. It was not planned or programmed, but it took place. And the Lord gave us the grace to be able to meet each other as men and as brothers."

Indeed, the KGB is not the measure of all things. It just seems that way sometimes.